

## Signs of Summer: Loon chicks appearing on local lakes

by Liz Jozwiak

Last Sunday on Father's Day, I was lucky enough to get out on Sports Lake to do some leisurely fishing. While most of the others in the boat were on a mission to hook into a Kokanee or a Rainbow trout, my attention wandered off towards watching the violet green swallows that were flying low along the water's edge picking off the mosquitoes and stone flies in their flight path.

I also observed a few Bonaparte's gulls near one of bogs, and a family of mallards with eight chicks feeding along the water's edge. In particular, I was hoping to see if the pair of common loons that usually nests on this lake produced any chicks yet.

Thanks to Nita and Harvey Douthit, who have monitored loons on Sports Lake for several years as part of the Kenai Loon Watch Program, we know that these loons have been successful at nesting and producing at least one chick every year.

While fishing, we never observed the loons on the main portion of the lake. There was quite a bit of boat activity, and with several families out fishing (including ourselves) I was pretty sure the loons were off in the quiet cove behind the peninsula.

As we headed back to the dock, we went slowly past the opening to that little cove, and were rewarded with eyeing one of the adult loons with a chick on its back. I was delighted to get a chance to see this! To minimize any disturbance to the loon family, our boat never created a wake, and we did not go towards the loon we observed.

Other than the nesting period from mid-May to mid-June, now is a very critical time for the young loon chicks and their parents as they can fall prey to predators, or be accidentally run over by motor boats and jet skis. Even birders or photographers can inadvertently disturb loons by approaching them too close with a canoe or kayak.

The Kenai Peninsula and particularly the northern portion of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is fortunate to have a healthy population of Common Loons.

Smaller lakes can support only one breeding pair such as on Sports Lake, but larger lakes such as Dolly Varden Lake in the Kenai NWR may have more than one pair with each pair occupying a bay or a section

of the lake. Loons prefer privacy but not necessarily solitude. Loons and humans (at moderate density) can co-exist on lakes provided some undisturbed suitable shoreline or island is available for nesting.

Building their nests close to the water allows the birds to slip directly from the nest to the water. The same nests are often used from one year to the next. However, drastic changes in water levels could cause the nest to fail. High water can flood the nest, or very low water could make the nest inaccessible to the adults. The pair may successfully re-nest should such an event occur.

The nests, made of coarse, decayed vegetable matter, are built on the ground. Sometimes eggs are deposited on a bare depression. Islands give protection from most predators and are the preferred nesting locations. One to three eggs are laid in June, however, two eggs are the most common. The olive brown eggs with irregular dark spots weigh about 160 grams (5.6 oz.). Both parents take turns incubating the eggs, usually for 26 to 31 days until they hatch.

The eggs will hatch within 24 hours of each other. Chicks can swim almost right away. Their brown-black down dries quickly, and the chicks join their parents out on the lake. The chicks will often ride on the backs of their parents to rest, stay warm, and avoid predators such as gulls and bald eagles.

Chicks are fed by their parents until they are about eight weeks of age. After this time the chicks begin to dive for some of their own food. By 11 to 13 weeks of age the young birds can feed themselves and are able to fly. Early in their life chicks are fed small food items including aquatic insects, small fish, and some aquatic vegetation. As they grow they are fed more fish.

Breeding loons need an undisturbed nesting site, and a quiet bay to raise their young. There are several things you can do this summer to help keep Kenai loons healthy and productive:

Human disturbance can be detrimental to loons in many ways: Direct physical interference with nests or young; increased wake from pleasure craft on lakes, which may swamp or destroy nests; loss of habitat caused by lakeshore development; and spills of oil and other pollutants all affect the nesting and rearing suc-

cess of this bird. Yet on many lakes loons have actually adapted quite successfully to some level of disturbance by people.

By observing adults and chicks only from a distance and by not disturbing nests, you can help reduce disturbance to the birds and their young.

You should never chase loons, and you should be careful with fishing tackle-abandoned or unattended fishing line may entangle and injure the birds. Boats should be used cautiously, avoiding high wakes or wash near the lake edge, and some shoreline areas should be left undisturbed to accommodate loon nests.

It is important for nesting loons to be given a wide

berth (200 Ft) when using lakes in May and June, the primary nesting period for loons in Alaska. Chicks developing in eggs left unattended will cool and die. Enjoy loons from a safe distance. If you see a loon rising out of the water running and splashing across the surface, you are too close. If the adult loon has been scared off its nest, the eggs can chill and die, or be eaten by a predator.

*Join the Kenai Loon Watch project and become a "Loon Ranger." Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*